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IMPROVING RETENTION FOR FIRST-TERM NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS IN AN
ONLINE UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM

A Scholarly Research Project

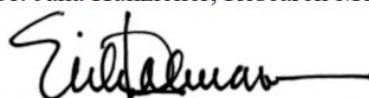
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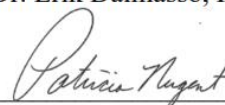
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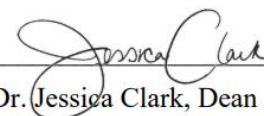
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ABSTRACT

Retention for online learners is declining so much that higher education institutions are graduating more learners than they are enrolling. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to find ways to improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program. Fourteen non-traditional learners participated in the study. Findings suggest that technology knowledge impacted programmatic difficulty for learners, and although learners were not receptive to a mandated orientation, orientation was effective. By incorporating technology and rigor into an orientation course, first-term non-traditional learners will be better prepared for their higher education journey. More research is needed.

Keywords: action research, mixed methods research, non-traditional students, orientation, student retention, survey research, undergraduate online programs

DEDICATION

This scholarly research is an embodiment of my time as a doctorate student, and there are a few people I would like to dedicate it to. First, to my two boys, Zay and Luca. When I started this journey, Luca was 5 months old, Zay was a year and a half, and I remember thinking, “when I complete this, Zay will be nearly five and Luca will be three.” Well, here we are, and I can hardly believe it. You boys have been with me every bit of the journey, from joining me in my live lessons, to providing content for my discussion posts throughout the years. I hope I am as much of an inspiration to you both as you are to me. Next, to my husband, Zack, who supported my decision to go back to school with no persuasion and helped make it such a smooth process even though we have two toddlers that run our lives. To my mom and dad, who instilled in me the love of learning, the value of education, and the passion I live my life with. To my sister, Indira (Bob), and brother, Raj, for always being my biggest cheerleaders, regardless of the adventure. Lastly, to my Aunty Sabina, one of my biggest role models in life. Watching her maintain a work-life balance while continuously being 100% present for her family was and is my biggest inspiration.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I work as a student advisor for an online undergraduate program at a public university (State University). Since 2018, first-term undergraduate retention has been an ongoing problem. State University is a high transfer credit college, which means a majority of the learners are non-traditional, or adult, learners. When I started, retention was such an issue that only 50% of the learners who were set on entering the program even started the program, and of those, only about half would register, or retain, for their upcoming term. This improved over the course of three years because specific strategies were put in place to help alleviate low retention. For example, a new student onboarding orientation was implemented. This was a mandated 10-minute session a learner had to complete in which they would identify their funding, watch a video explaining their responsibilities as a learner, break down the amount of time that would be dedicated for them as a part-time or full-time learner, and choosing the option that worked best for them. Once this was complete, the learner would schedule a welcome call with me, their advisor. During this welcome call I would help the learner register for their first semester, or the first two terms if they started at the beginning of a semester and set the expectation for communication. This was customized based on the learner's needs and typically meant more meaningful, and less frequent, communication. But still, retention after the first term year-over-year was, overall, low. This chapter will introduce the exploration of orientation as one way to improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education institutions are struggling to maintain learner retention. According to Case (2013), "While more students have access to and are enrolling in online higher education

programs, an alarming number of them are failing to graduate,” (p. 1). Low retention has especially been a problem with online programs. Ali and Smith (2015) identified that 17% of learners dropped out from an online course with 30 enrollees, compared to 5% of learners in a campus-based course with 44 enrollees, while Allen and Seaman (2013) noticed that online learner dropout rates range from 20-50%. This is a higher dropout rate compared to traditional classes, which range from 10-20%. To simplify these numbers, Tinto (2012) explained that one out of every four learners will enter a higher education institution and fail to receive a degree.

Improving Retention

Studies have shown that there is low retention after the first term for undergraduate learners in online learning. According to Hachey et al. (2012), one reason for low retention may be the lack of technology/internet knowledge. With a fully online program, there are no longer face-to-face encounters, so if a learner is not technologically literate, taking online courses may not prove to be a success. Struggling academically can lead to lower self-esteem or feeling isolated which can break down communication between teacher and student. This can cause more academic struggle, discouraging learners from staying in a program.

While there are many reasons that first-term retention in online undergraduate programs is low, the three areas of focus are orientation, technology, and program difficulty. Better understanding the connections between low retention and orientation, technology, and program difficulty can help higher education institutions to better recognize and address the problem of low retention. Technology and program difficulty are challenges and obstacles, but orientation is a possible solution. Not every school or program mandates an orientation for learners entering the program, but with a 100% online program, technology can be a huge factor in determining the success of a learner. Even something as simple as navigating a website must

be mastered. Likewise, having the correct tools such as Microsoft Office, high speed internet, and the capability to download platforms like Microsoft and Screencast-O-Matic is imperative for a learner's success in a 100% online program. While being technologically savvy is something that can be acquired through practice, program difficulty is a much more in-depth issue. If a learner is already struggling with program concepts, pace of the course, or workload of the classes, it may be difficult to be successful. These challenges are compounded when a learner has a scope of responsibilities outside of the classroom.

Lack of Preparation

While there are many criteria upon admitting a learner to a college or university, three criteria that should be heavily considered are grade point average (GPA), financial aid considerations, and previous course withdrawal history (Cochran et al., 2017). These criteria can be crucial in determining the predicted retention of a learner. GPA is much more than being able to regurgitate course material. In most cases a learner's GPA is directly akin to work ethic. A low GPA is not always related to the fact that a learner is not grasping the content; it may just mean they have a poor work ethic. Additionally, if a learner is receiving financial aid, it is probably because they need assistance paying for courses. To satisfy financial aid standards a certain GPA must be maintained and throwing learners "to the wolves" (that is, the first term of the first college semester) may not help them thrive. Lastly, course withdrawal history plays a huge part in determining if a learner needs orientation. If a transcript is filled with a record of withdrawn courses, or W's, what is the persistence of said learner? It is not to be implied that previous grades should be a determining factor when admitting learners into a program, but as mentioned by both Cochran et al. (2014) and Marshall (2017), a student with a GPA of 3.0 or higher is less likely to withdraw than a student with a lower GPA. Learners who constantly withdraw from

courses may not show the same persistence as learners who push through and receive good grades.

Low Technology Knowledge/Skill

Based on welcome calls I have with learners, those who enroll in an online program, especially for the first time, enter with high hopes and low expectations of what their responsibilities will be. One of the things I have learned as an advisor is to never assume. Never assume a learner knows how much work a program entails; never assume a learner knows how to navigate their institutions learning management system; and never assume a learner knows how to use technology. Using technology varies for everyone, but “even if students are familiar with computing, they may be novices at learning and communicating in an online [environment],” (Hachey et al., 2012, p. 5). Even though a learner can access their email, open a Microsoft document, or can log in to a school database separately, it is not safe to assume that a learner is efficient in handling all those things simultaneously. “This can affect the amount of effort and persistence they put forth when faced with obstacles, and thus, affect attrition rates,” (Hachey et al., 2012, p. 6). However, accessibility is an important factor in becoming more technologically savvy. According to Muljana and Luo (2019), learners “expressed an appreciation towards instructional guidance demonstrated through interactive materials, clear instructions, logical course structure, unambiguous label on course elements and findability of instructional materials” (p. 29). What is more, this allows an easier course design, which in turn results in “attractive, interesting, and relevant learning elements that foster student motivation,” (Pittenger & Doering, 2010, p. 286). Anything that is clear and concise will always be appreciated and helpful for learners navigating the online world.

Program Difficulty

Whether it be the pace of the program, the course workload, or the concepts in the program itself, online courses can be challenging. What is even more challenging is not being face-to-face to ask questions and get an immediate response. According to Muljana and Luo (2019), “The determination of successful e-learning is a shared responsibility among the learner, faculty, instructor, technical staff, administrative, learning support and use of the Internet and other technologies,” (p. 23). In an online program, a learner can email the instructor or his or her peers, but there is no knowing how long it will take to receive a response. Instructors usually reply within 48 hours, but that is two days of waiting for an answer that, if a learner were in a classroom, they would receive immediately. Waiting for a response also means a pause in a learner’s work, which can set them back as well as give them a sense of isolation and not feeling supported (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Quick and clear feedback means that necessary adjustments can be made in a timely manner without waiting in limbo for an answer.

Two significant tools learners can utilize with program difficulty are successive relearning and communication. Successive relearning involves practice and study (Rawson et al., 2013), along with open communication with peers, instructors, and advisors. When it comes to peer communication, D’Souza et al. (2018) describes a mentoring program that allows “mentors and the advisors [to] meet regularly with the Scholar in person to discuss learner progress and troubleshoot potential barriers (including finances) to academic success,” (p. 8). This focuses the attention of the learner on the degree, concentrating on the courses it takes to get there. It is important to note, however, that some learners just do not reciprocate communication.

Orientation

Orientation can be a possible solution to alleviate low retention. According to Arhin and Wang’eri (2017), “Orientation program[s] [are] significantly related to retention of students in

distance learning,” (p. 10). Orientation courses are created to give learners a better understanding of the program they are about to start. Some schools do not have a mandated orientation option, some schools have a voluntary orientation option, and some schools target specific learners for orientation to increase their success by providing a foundation course (Stone et al., 2018) prior to the first course of the program.

As mentioned previously, GPA, financial aid considerations, and previous course withdrawal history are three factors that may be crucial in determining the predicted retention of learners in online programs and reinforce the need for a mandatory orientation. In my opinion, lack of preparation, low technology knowledge, and program difficulty should be enough to mandate an orientation course before a learner starts any program. Even if learners are familiar with the concepts within the program, they may not be technologically savvy or be able to keep up with the pace of an online program. According to Marshall (2017), “Orientations for new online students should be appropriately designed to adapt to student learning style. Online learning requires students to be technology savvy in addition to self-motivated and self-disciplined,” (p. 2). If an orientation is simply refamiliarizing a learner with the necessary browsers, programs, and websites they will be accustomed to in the program, that is already a step up from entering the program without that knowledge.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore orientation as one way to improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs. The question that guided this action research project was, is orientation effective in improving retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? The study’s sub-questions were 1) How does technology play a role in the retention of first-term non-traditional learners in an online

undergraduate program? 2) How does program difficulty impact retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program?

Personal Belief and Definitions

As a student advisor, low retention after the first term of the first semester impacts my day-to-day job responsibilities by continuously fluctuating the number of students I support. Therefore, I believe mandating an orientation for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program may help improve retention. With my personal belief articulated, the following definitions guided the study.

Retention

Retention in this action research study is defined as how long a learner remains in a program. According to Berge and Huang (2004), “retention is continued student participation in a learning event to completion, which in higher education could be a course, program, institution, or system,” (p. 3). This study will identify if, by incorporating orientation in an online program focusing on technology and rigor, retention can be improved.

First-term

A learner is considered a “first-term” learner during the first course(s) of their program. According to Armstrong et al. (2018), “the first few courses of a program are significant in terms of students deciding to either remain or dropout,” (p. 267). In this study, a term is the first 8 weeks of the program, in which learners take their first or first two courses.

Online Program

According to Muljana and Luo (2019), “online learning encompasses the use of a wide variety of electronic media as well as information and communication technologies to achieve educational purposes,” (p. 22). Online programs incorporate an abundant number of digital

platforms learners may not have used before but could be familiarized with during a mandated orientation. In this study an online program indicates that all the courses for the degree program a learner is working towards are 100% online.

Non-Traditional

Because they are adult learners, adapting to the obstacles a program presents may be difficult, so including examples of program rigor in an orientation may be necessary for student success and retention. In this study, a non-traditional learner is any learner over the age of 25 (Muniz, 2023).

Significance of the Problem

It seems that first-term retention is not only a problem at State University, but a global problem (*SEAtS Software*, 2023). Over the past two decades, the growth of learners in online learning programs has consistently increased year after year. Yet, “the dropout numbers in online learning environments are reportedly higher than the traditional learning environment [and] completion rates in online courses are historically lower,” (Muljana & Luo, 2019, p. 21). As an advisor, I have noticed that if a learner makes it past the first two terms, that learner’s chance of completing the program is higher, but if the learner does not make it past the first term, whether the learner passed the first term class(es) or not, chances are neither I nor State University will hear from that learner again. Regardless of the retention strategies used, bringing back a learner who has not retained after the first term is very low. By exploring orientation and identifying if technology and program difficulty play a role in retention for first term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs, faculty, staff, advisors, and others working in the higher education field may be able to better understand how to retain quality learners that will fulfil program demands after the first term, and ideally through graduation.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced exploring orientation as one way to improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs. Chapter 2 will dive into a literature review of this action research study. Chapter 3 will provide details surrounding the research methodology and methods used in this study, including participants, setting, procedures, and data analysis. Chapter 4 will present the findings of the research study by comparing the research questions to the findings, identifying common themes, and making connections to the literature. Chapter 5 will provide a conclusion of the study by stating implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and a discussion of the study's limitations.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore orientation as one way to improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs. In preparation for reporting the study's research design, findings, and conclusions, this chapter offers a review of the literature related to the study's purpose, including an exploration of technology, program difficulty, and orientation.

Summary of the Research Problem

Increasing retention is a struggle within higher education institutions and according to Habley et al. (2012), "students' decisions to drop out or withdraw are based primarily on their interaction within the institution," (p. 237). According to Bawa (2016),

One of the biggest deterrents to online retention is the over-estimation of student capabilities with respect to the demands of time, commitment, and technological skills required in online learning. One way to deal with this is through orientation programs that introduce students to the rigors and unique demands of the online classes. (p. 7)

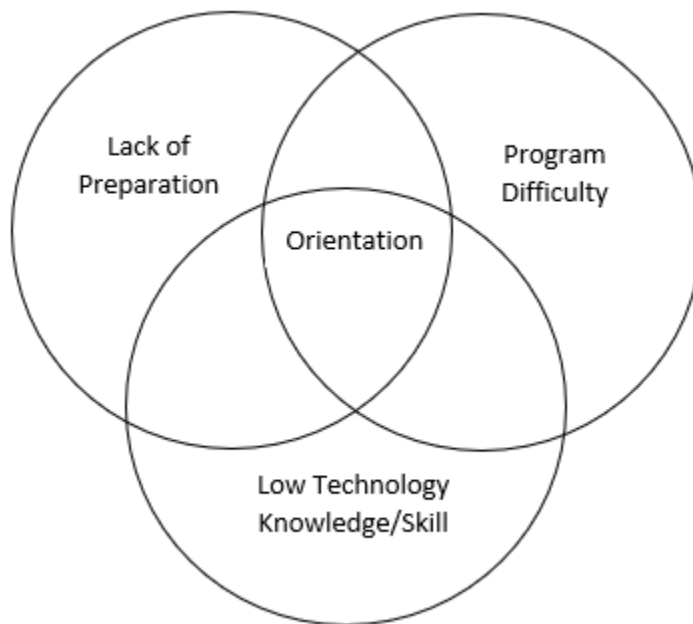
Introducing the learner to program expectations should be standard best practice in higher education. According to Bertram (2020), "from 2000–2009...institutions have seen a 30% increase in enrollment of students aged 25 and over, with these groups making up 39%–42% of the total enrollment in these institutions," (par. 1). Meanwhile, Lambert et al. (2014) mentions that non-traditional learners "form a distinct population in that they often bring rich personal and employment experiences to the classroom," but may "struggle to support multiple roles and responsibilities above and beyond those of traditional learners and can require significant adjustments in terms of their learning styles, needs, and abilities," (p. 1). This implies that non-

traditional learners may struggle with technological difficulties while trying to understand the course material.

Theoretical Framework

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



Note. Diagram created by researcher on the 2nd of November 2023.

Lack of Preparation

According to Hachey et al. (2013), “7 to 20% of students who take online courses are very likely to withdraw from a college or university,” (p. 27). In reviewing online programs with strong retention rates of 80% or above, Willging and Johnson (2009) identified two recurring themes: 1) the first few courses of a program are significant in terms of students deciding to either remain or dropout and 2) students persist when they have high levels of interaction with peers and instructors. In other words, if a learner finds that they are unsuccessful in the first few courses of a program, they are likely to withdraw from the courses.

In fact, Bawa (2016) found that learners “who are less experienced and at an earlier semester of their program are more likely to drop the program” (p. 2) and learners who are in the “early stages of their program feel less prepared to deal with the academic rigors,” (p. 2). Additionally, these learners may have yet to commit on a financial level to the program. On the contrary, learners who have spent a longer time in the program may be “more motivated to complete the course, because they have already invested considerable time and efforts on it...the input in time and effort is a critical determinant as to when a student is more likely to withdraw,” (p. 2). As a learner goes through a program, there is a chance that courses will become more rigorous, but there is also a possibility that the learner will acclimate to the technological changes that may have been difficult in the beginning of the program. More than that, as the program is coming to an end, learners can see the finish line.

Technology

Evolving Technology

Bawa (2016) mentions that another key reason that institutions and organizations should spend more time, money, and effort on training faculty is the changing expectations for online courses and course designs that involve the use of many different media and technologies to deliver course content. Modern trends in the changing attitudes and aptitudes in education technology create a need for better trained faculty. As Eom and Ashill (2016) mention, “the primary responsibility for maintaining the quality of some categories such as technology and learner support lies with administrators,” (p. 27). When quality technology and support is maintained, learners benefit from differentiated learning methods and support within their online learning programs.

Evolving with Technology

According to Gray and Diloreto (2016), “students’ perceptions of course usability correlated to students’ satisfaction and learning,” (p. 5). The easier something is to understand, the higher the likelihood of learners successfully mastering it. Eom and Ashill (2016) mention that, “re-educating instructors to continuously improve their skills and knowledge so that they can perform better as course designers, discussion/technology facilitators, and motivators is paramount,” (p. 22). As times are changing, technology is ever evolving. Adapting to that change can positively impact new learners. While it can be challenging for faculty members to develop presence in an online course when face-to-face meetings are not required (Seery et al., 2021), online courses also face the issue of ever-changing technological advances. Staying abreast of such advances or changes requires a time commitment (Muljo et al., 2017). While colleges and universities likely cannot require instructors to keep up with the ever-changing technology, I believe there should be routines put into place to update technology knowledge every few semesters. Programs, databases, and systems are always improving, and knowing how and when to adapt benefits higher education institutions, their faculty, and their learners.

Expectations

Bozarth et al. (2004) found a disconnect in learners’ and faculty members’ expectations about learners’ technical competencies, the amount of time learners should devote to a course, the level of interaction between faculty and learners, and the level of interaction amongst learners. While someone proficient with technology may take less time to maneuver a database, someone with less technological skills may spend a few hours a week on such a task. However, it is important to note that technology skills alone do not guarantee success (Arrowsmith, 2017). According to Ng (2012), “a large segment of online learners know how to use technology and

are familiar with the digital environment,” however, it does not mean that those learners are “equally conversant with educational technology and e-learning environments” (p. 1071) as faculty, staff, advisors, and others at institutions that offer online courses and programs may think. In other words, what a person does on the computer in everyday life does not necessarily correlate to what is required as an online learner.

Technology Differences: Personal vs Academia

Another issue relates to the technical expertise of online learners in relation to the course design. Bawa (2016) mentions that “although this generation of students may have technical knowledge relating to social media and digital entertainment options such as video games, these skills may not be enough to be successful in an online course,” (p. 5). As a student, inferring success rate based on the amount of time spent on the computer is not an accurate depiction. Bawa (2016) explains, “A key flaw when assessing student compatibilities with technology is crediting them with more capabilities than they actually possess in relation to the online course materials” (p. 5). According to Case (2013)

New technologies have given rise to innovations such as mobile learning, MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses), e-books, and immersive educational simulations.

Simply stated, a digital game is a computer based interactive media in which players complete prescribed tasks as part of a game. (p. 5)

In other words, learning can be fun, but fun on its own does not necessarily mean learning.

According to Ng (2012) “digital natives, who can also be...online learners, prefer to be online for everything including accessing information, getting entertainment, and socializing,” (p. 1076). These are the learners who prefer quick delivery and exchange of information, like to multi-task, and respond better to graphics instead of text. On the other hand, there are also

learners who are not digital natives. These are the learners who struggle with technology and may be classified as digital immigrants, “people who transitioned from an analog world to a digital one,” (*waterford.org*, 2021, par. 2). Therefore, it is quite possible that such learners of online courses often experience computer-related problems, especially at the beginning of the semester, and probably throughout the semester if they don’t find a solution. This causes many of them to “drop the course well before they get the opportunity to become comfortable in the courses’ cyber zones and also after they have made it several weeks into the semester,” (Ng, 2012, p. 1077), wasting time, energy, effort, and money.

Program Difficulty

Faculty Communication and Feedback

According to Bawa (2016), “if learners are not comfortable with self-learning and constructing knowledge out of their own initiatives, the online environment can become intimidating for them,” (p. 4). One of the most common retention strategies is providing timely assessment and feedback to learners. Seery et al. (2021) mentioned that “when a faculty member gives meaningful feedback, it can help students improve in areas of deficiency,” (p. 78). It is important to note that not all feedback is helpful, and sometimes it is the professors who lack clear, concise communication. Communication, though, is a two-way street. In a study conducted by Fraser et al. (2018) learners were given effective communication and it was found that regardless of that, response rates were low. The research stated that 101/121 learners received emails asking to participate in the survey. Of that, 21 learners were graduate students, and 80 learners were discontinued. Of those learners, eight graduate learners responded and 10 of the discontinued learners responded for a total of 18/101 learners. The communication was in the order of the original mail, an email reminder three days later, and an appreciation email after the

survey. While these were not current learners, and one could argue that they were just not checking their school email, the learner response rate is a good indicator of current learners in online programs. Instructor communication is often a discussion between learners and advisors, and sometimes instructors have delayed responses to learners because they, too, have a lot on their plate. While the demand for online programs is continuously increasing, and funding for colleges/universities is decreasing. According to Tudor (2018), “Universities have had to increase tuition, cut programs and personnel, and diversify their revenue streams” (p. 3). This typically means that one professor teaches multiple classes and may not be readily available to respond to a learner in a learner’s idea of a timely fashion.

Learner Assumptions

Hachey et al. (2014) states that learners “enrolled in lower-level classes which are typically taken earlier in a college career might be at greater risk of dropping out,” (p. 17). In a study by Bawa (2016), it was acknowledged that, “learners do not consider the magnitude of workload and the required depth of their involvement in the online courses as reasonable criteria to make the decision to go online,” (p. 4). When learners hear the words “online course,” they assume that they can complete the courses when they have the free time, which—as a person currently enrolled in an online doctoral program—is not the case. As a result, when learners enroll in online classes, many are “unpleasantly surprised to find that the conveniences of flexible hours and lower costs outweigh the inconveniences of excessive demands on lifestyles, technical issues, and concerns related to the attitude and aptitude of learners toward a new platform,” (Bawa, 2016, p. 3). The online learning environment is largely self-driven and dependent on the learners’ ability to manage academic responsibilities, with fewer support than those available in face-to-face classes. Therefore, “if learners have not experienced this kind of

self-imposed academic discipline before, they are very likely to experience demotivation, forcing them to quit” (Bawa, 2016, p. 4). Demotivation comes in all forms and can easily be blamed on technology issues, lack of time, work conflicts, or even family issues. Regardless of the reason, at the point where a learner is no longer motivated, that learner’s mind is already made up to leave the program.

Program Difficulty and Technology

Numerous studies have shown that there is low retention after the first term for undergraduate learners in online learning. According to Hachey et al. (2012), one reason for low retention may be the lack of technology/internet knowledge. With a fully online program, there are no longer face-to-face encounters, so if a learner is not technologically inclined, this might prove to be a huge hindrance to success or even lead to a lower sense of belonging (Ruffalo, 2015). Sense of belonging includes but is not limited to feelings of community in an institution, club, or activity that is more than just a learner ID number. According to Maslow (1943), a sense of belonging shapes an individual’s behavior. So, in an online course, not feeling like part of the classroom community may very well lead to feeling that the overall program is too difficult (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

According to Willging and Johnson (2009), “lack of social interaction between students and between the teacher and the students represent a major factor in the decision to withdraw from an online program,” (p. 117). Even when one factors in program difficulty, if a learner is not communicating their concerns or asking questions, that learner cannot receive the help they want. Technology concerns will always be prevalent with online learners. These concerns may range anywhere from how to use the platform, where to find resources, and how to submit assignments. A learner’s sense of belonging extends beyond the classroom to encompass all

relationships and interactions within a college or university. Therefore, lack of communication between the learner, instructors, peers, and advisor, which is a key factor for a successful term (Fraser et al., 2018), and may lead to lower learner success.

Orientation

According to Seery et al. (2021), a “key student success factor is the implementation of mandatory orientation programs,” (p. 78). Ward-Roof (2010) mentions that “no matter how well-orchestrated the program or how efficient the process, orientation has not completed its job unless students are actually more prepared to face the challenges of academe,” (p. 32). However, Travers (2016), acknowledges that learners who are not sufficiently prepared for their online courses have a higher rate of not completing them. Arrowsmith (2017), states that “there seems to be little information and very few courses offered to students to help them prepare for being successful in online classes. In fact, many student misconceptions linger about how online courses work,” (p. 7). For example, students may be concerned about how long the orientation course would take to complete, what would be discussed within orientation, and how impactful it would be for those taking it. This research supports my personal belief that an orientation for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program may help improve retention.

Purpose of Orientation

Arhin and Wang’eri (2017) conducted a study of orientation programs predicting learner retention in distance learning and found that respondents’ satisfaction with the orientation program was very high. According to the study, “this high or very satisfied response by respondents may be due to the fact that they have been able to adjust well to the learning environment through the orientation program,” (p. 10). Orientation is supposed to prepare

learners for the rigors of the course ahead, not necessarily the content, but managing the different systems they will have to use. The study showed that the orientation program “plays a central role in retaining students. The odds for the orientation program also showed that a one-point increase in the orientation program will increase student retention by a factor of 2.19,” (Arhin & Wang’eri, 2017, p. 10), demonstrating that an orientation would increase retention in the long run.

Hoffman et al. (2020) mentions that learners need to be prepared for the academic and social learning that make up their educational journey, explaining that while some learners “may arrive with years of online learning experience, others will require familiarization with processes, tools, expectations, and the campus community—and all will benefit from an introduction to their new academic community,” (par. 1). Orientation could embody all of that. Robinson et al. (1996) mentions that orientation experiences support students' transition to the first year of college, which is essential for student success. After almost 30 years, this study still is even more prominent in a digital learning environment. The purpose of an orientation is to support a learner’s transition, and in online learning learners need that support more than they think. Allowing learners to really understand the time required for a program will benefit not only the learners, but also bring positive retention rates for the school.

Orientation Studies

Two studies that have used mixed methods to explore the topics of student retention strategies and benefits of orientation on college student success are Fraser et al. (2018) and Arrowsmith (2017). Fraser et al. found that personal variables, institutional variables, and circumstantial variables (Berge & Huang, 2004, p. were “vital for informing the main study on attrition and retention” of learners (2018, p. 273), while Arrowsmith (2017) found that the study

“further supports existing research that demonstrates a need for an orientation to online learning course for new online learners,” (2017, p. 128). Both studies addressed the issues of retention in higher education. While Fraser et al. (2017) also utilized surveys in their research, Arrowsmith (2018) utilized a questionnaire—including survey-like responses, asking learner participants to identify their GPA, major, the number of online courses they had previously taken, if they had ever dropped an online course, and why—a GRIT scale, which measures perseverance in obtaining long-term goals, pre and post-test, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data in their research.

Arrowsmith (2017) found that six of 65 students had previously dropped an online course and the two main reasons were time commitment and the unexpected rigor of the program. In addition, Arrowsmith investigated four institutions and found that one institution re-designed their online courses every few years, another was beginning to create an orientation course when they were re-approached, another ceased communication, and the last agreed to use the orientation course Arrowsmith created. Finally, Arrowsmith (2017) stated, “the most beneficial features of the course were the units on using JING/screen capture, using the online library, making updates and downloading software to their computer,” (pp. 111-112), and mentioned that what was least beneficial was “the discussion board unit” with learners responding that they either “already knew all of the content” or they “already knew how to do everything,” (p. 112). Utilizing the technology that would be anticipated in the program proved to be a benefit of the mini course, whereas traditional items, such as discussion posts, were less beneficial. However, when analyzing the data from Arrowsmith’s research, anticipating the timeframe it would take to complete said discussion posts would allow learners to gather an idea of weekly time commitments.

Expectations for Orientation

Of all the factors identified in this chapter that may impact learner retention, technology and program difficulty are the obstacles that I have observed firsthand. Based on what I have learned in this literature review, I continue to believe that a mandatory orientation with the same level of difficulty, rigor, and workload as one week of a typical course in an online program will better prepare learners for the challenges ahead. With technology and program difficulty as factors leading to low retention, adding this in a mandatory orientation could solve several student retention problems. Often, learners expect that they can conquer it all—work a full-time job, be involved with their family, have a social life, sleep, *and* complete courses—without really taking into consideration just how much time and dedication a program will encompass. By successfully completing a mandated orientation with the same amount of work and rigor as a typical week in their courses, the literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that learners will have a more concrete expectation of what to expect and be equipped with basic skills necessary to be successful in online courses before they start the program.

Chapter Summary

This chapter offered a review of the literature related to the study's purpose, including an exploration of technology, program difficulty, and orientation. Overall, the existing literature supports creating an orientation that encompasses the lack of preparation first-term non-traditional learners may come in with, the program difficulty to be expected, and technology to be used within an online undergraduate program will increase retention for learners. Chapter 3 will describe the study's research methodology and methods.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The purpose of this study was to explore orientation as one way to improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs. The question that guided this action research project was, is orientation effective in improving retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? The study's sub-questions were 1) How does technology play a role in the retention of first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? 2) How does program difficulty impact retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? This chapter will describe the study's research methodology and methods.

Research Methodology

Mixed-Methods

This study utilized a mixed methods research methodology. A mixed methods approach includes collecting both qualitative data and quantitative data. Qualitative data includes words and meanings, and is non-experimental, whereas quantitative data includes numbers and stats, and is experimental. "The true benefit lies in the fact that the consideration of both types of data may provide a better understanding of the research problem than either type of data alone," (Creswell, 2005, p. 42). According to Bhat (2023), qualitative data focuses on "explaining and understanding experiences and perspectives," while quantitative research focuses on the use of "numerical data, such as statistics and surveys," (par. 5). A mixed methods research methodology is appropriate for this study because this study collects both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data for this study will be based on the short responses within

the survey (see Appendix A) that learners participate in, and the quantitative data will be pulled from the yes/no questions on the survey, as well as retention data over three consecutive terms.

Action Research

This study employed an action research approach. While there are various definitions of action research, the simplest and clearest statement is that action research is “a form of self-reflective problem solving,” (McKernan, 1988, p. 173). Action research offers a step-by-step guide to address an issue the researcher would like to solve, methods on how to solve it, the data from said methods, and the analysis of said data. Within action research, “Change is seen to be an integral part of research, and, using this approach, the aim is to bring about a change in practice,” (Leach, 2014, p. 1). There are two general types of action research, participatory action research and practical action research. Regardless of the type, if there is a problem within an institution or community, action research can be used to help find solutions, using literature, data, and analysis of the data. Practical action research is appropriate for this particular study because it can help me, as an advisor of 100% online students at State University, to better understand the issue of student retention and identify the changes to improve it.

Cycle of Action Research

“Action research is a cyclical process with four distinct phases per cycle: plan, act, observe, and reflect,” (Clarke, 2023, par. 1). This includes identifying the goal, or research question, implementing the plan, collecting data, analyzing the data, and sharing the results or findings. It is described as a cycle, because even after planning, acting, and observing, reflecting includes asking what next steps will be, and the sequence begins again with planning. There is continuous growth in the process of action research. According to Kolk, “In light of your findings, you should have adjusted your theory or made it more specific. Modify your plan of

action, begin collecting data again, or begin asking new questions!” (par. 32). When analyzing the findings of my study, I will continue to modify, collect data, and analyze findings.

Advantages of Action Research

One of the main advantages of action research is that “problems and issues in everyday life are addressed in a practical and positive way, feeding the results of research directly back into practice. It takes the form of continuous cycles of development and change,” (Leach, 2014, p. 4). Moreover, “it has personal benefits for the practitioner, as it contributes to professional development,” (Leach, 2014, p. 4). Since action research involved a study created by the researcher to address a specific problem or issue, those who implement the findings or results may directly benefit, thus growing professionally, perhaps even adding to the research.

Disadvantages of Action Research

One of the main disadvantages of action research is “the involvement of practitioners limits the scope and scale of the research, limiting the extent to which the findings can be generalized,” (Leach, 2014, p. 4). While there can be suggestions for future research, the study would only be applicable to a certain population. In addition, “the researcher is unlikely to be detached and impartial in his, or her, approach to the research,” (Leach, 2014, p. 4). Because there is a goal in mind, the action research study may be something near and dear to the researcher’s heart, thus possibly creating bias. According to Pannucci and Wilkins (2010), “as some degree of bias is nearly always present in a published study, readers must also consider how bias might influence a study's conclusions,” (p. 1).

Practical Action Research

This study is classified as practical action research because the specific research problem is low retention for first-term non-traditional learners at State University. In educational settings,

practical action research focuses on “addressing a specific problem or need in a classroom, school, or similar community by stressing the “how-to” process of actually conducting action research,” (Mertler, 2020, para. 1). By this definition, the study’s three areas of orientation, technology, and program difficulty are the “how-to” that make it practical. It is my hope that by increasing retention for first-term non-traditional undergraduate learners in an online program, the lives of the study’s research participants—and hopefully others— will be improved. The quality of State University’s online programs will increase, and the advisors who work with students enrolled in online programs will see a rise in learner success and retention.

Survey Research

This study’s quantitative and qualitative data were collected via an online survey. “Surveys are used as a tool by researchers to gain a greater understanding about individual or group perspectives relative to a particular concept or topic of interest,” (Mills, 2021, par. 1). According to Check and Schutt, (2012), survey research is defined as "the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions" (p. 160). According to Bhat (2023), “surveys must meet the four main characteristics of a research design: neutrality, reliability, validity, and generalization.” (par. 6). Neutrality ensures that the survey is free from bias. Reliability refers to consistency of the survey, while validity refers to accuracy of the survey. Lastly, generalization allows that the survey be relatable to larger populations beyond the participants within this research. When creating this study’s survey, I created a couple of demographic questions, and then focused on orientation, technology, and program difficulty, to ensure neutrality and generalization. Brace (2018) acknowledges that one of the advantages of online survey self-completion is that it “provides researchers with the opportunity to conduct large scale, geographically spread surveys,” (p. 26); However, he also acknowledges that one of

the disadvantages is that “access to potential respondents is not always as straight forward as the researcher might hope, and there are issues regarding response rates,” (p. 26). Even when sending out a survey to 250 learners, there is the possibility that only a handful will check their email and complete the survey.

Research Context

Research Setting

The institution researched in this study was a medium-sized public university located on a rural campus, hereafter referred to as State University. It has a total undergraduate enrollment of 12,070, and total undergraduate and graduate enrollment of 27,968 learners. While the university offers more than 100 programs, the specific program in which learners were recruited was a 100% online bachelor program. The learner population for the program consists of roughly 500 learners, and of that, a majority of the learners are over the age of 25, or adult learners, and more than 75% of the population is male. Many of these learners also have families and careers, so a bachelor’s degree is merely a way of moving up in their current company, according to learner interactions. With online learning, this is a common trend. According to Worth (2016), many companies “stipulate that employees must continue employment for a specified period after receiving the benefit,” (par. 2) retaining employee’s or requiring them to pay it back if they leave. Therefore, completing a degree faster to move on to a different company is not a motivation for learners.

GSD 101

It is important to note that within the online program at State University, learners have three semesters and six terms for the year. There are two terms per semester and terms are broken down into A and B, representing the first eight weeks of the semester (A term) and the

second eight weeks of the semester (B term). There are also five starts to the program identified as follows: Fall A, Fall B, Spring A, Spring B, Summer A (see Table 1). Learners can start in any of these terms. If a learner enters the program with under thirty credit hours (typically the credits transferred from their previous institution or institutions), that learner is required to complete a mandatory orientation called student success seminar, or GSD 101, which goes through how to be successful in college. GSD 101 is a student success seminar, and only mandated for learners who start the program with under 30 credit hours. Since this course is not offered in the summer semester, learners who begin the program in the summer must take this course in their second term. The retention of the GSD 101 subgroup showed a decrease in retention over three consecutive terms.

Table 1

Semesters and terms at State University

Fall	Fall A	Start	8 weeks
	Fall B	Start	8 weeks
Spring	Spring A	Start	8 weeks
	Spring B	Start	8 weeks
Summer	Summer A	Start	8 weeks
	Summer B		8 weeks

Note. Table created by researcher on the 20th of November 2023.

Researcher Positionality

According to Herr and Anderson (2015), one's "positionality as a researcher means asking the question, who am I in relation to my participants and my setting?" (p. 37). In this study, I was an "insider: researcher studies own self/practice," (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 41).

While the survey itself was anonymous, I was the direct advisor for the learners asked to participate in the survey. To minimize my insider position, I assured learners that the survey was completely anonymous and had no correlation to their academics; it was strictly part of my doctoral program studies. I clearly communicated that participation in the study was completely voluntary and I offered no incentives for participation or repercussions for opting not to participate. When constructing the survey questions, I was very careful not to create questions that would reveal a learner's identity. In addition, the survey was sent out to learners, and the survey was created in a way that a spreadsheet of all the responses would be pulled directly from the form, to maintain the integrity of data collection and analysis.

Participant Recruitment, Selection, and Informed Consent

Two hundred and fifty learners were sent an email inviting them to participate in the voluntary, anonymous online survey (see appendix B). Those learners were part of the 100% online program and ranged from first-year learners to seniors within their program. If a learner wished to participate, they simply clicked on the link provided, which required that learners give their informed consent to participate in the study prior to beginning the survey. If a learner did not give their consent, the survey closed out and the learner was prevented from responding. Responses were anonymous and questions in the survey pertained to orientation, technology, and program difficulty.

Participants

Of the 250 learners invited to participate in the survey, 14 non-traditional learners responded. All these learners were my direct advisees. Of the 14 learners who responded, three were female and 11 were male. While all 14 learners responded to the survey, only 12 learners answered all of the questions while two learners did not respond to every single question. The

response rate of the learners who partially participated in the survey was 21.4%, while the percentage of learners who completed every survey question was 78.6%. Of the 14 learners who participated, nine were in the age bracket of 26-40 and five were in the age bracket of 41-65. I utilized the responses from all 14 respondents for this study, since there were three categories that learners could respond to.

Research Methods

Data Collection

The process of obtaining permission from State University consisted of submitting an Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal as well as clarifying questions asked by the Research Compliance Coordinator at State University. Once completed and approved, the institution granted a letter of permission to collect data with no involvement from State University aside from their learners being recruited for the study.

Timeline

Data collection took place over a seven-month period (see Table 2). The survey was emailed to 250 learners on June 20, 2022, and a reminder email was sent out the following week, on June 27 (see Table 2). The survey was sent out as a link via Microsoft Forms, so that once each learner completed it, the results populated on the “responses” tab of the Forms. The survey (see appendix B) consisted of nine questions, and referred to the program’s orientation, technology, and program difficulty. The total questions included appropriate responses such as yes or no, multiple choice, a Likert scale, and short response. It is estimated that the survey took about five minutes to complete.

Table 2

Timeline of action research

Date	Procedure
January 14, 2022	Submit CUHSR proposal after obtaining letter of permission from institution
June 20, 2022	Send survey to learners
June 27, 2022	Reminder email for survey
July 8, 2022	Close Survey
February 24, 2023	Start data analysis
December 15, 2023	Conclude data analysis

Note. Table created by researcher on the 20th of June 2023.

Learners were given two weeks to participate in the survey. The survey closed on July 8, 2022, but because of my doctoral course offerings, data analysis did not begin until February 2023. Between July 2022 and February 2023, the survey responses were kept in a locked file within my laptop, and only I had the password and access to the laptop. Data analysis occurred from February 2023 to December 2023.

Historical Data

In addition to the survey, historical data for the specific learner population was collected and analyzed. Historical data included the tracking of retention for first-term non-traditional learners, term-after-term, as collected by the researcher. Excel trackers showed the number of first-term non-traditional learners in the 100% online program retained for their second term and for multiple terms. Because the historical data was strictly quantitative, the only data used to exemplify program difficulty and technology was the survey. Academic integrity was exhibited in all aspects of this research study. The data remained anonymous, was not tampered with, or suppressed, and was deleted from the hard drive after the final research report was published.

Data Analysis

Once the survey results were collected, a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was populated using the Google Form capabilities. Since all the survey results were anonymous, no names or

other identifying information were collected throughout the survey, but the responses were able to be filtered to analyze orientation, technology, and program difficulty. Mertler (2020) mentions “surveys and questionnaires permit the practitioner-researcher to gather a lot of—as well as a variety of—information relatively quickly,” (p. 144). The data compiled was filtered by multiple comparisons, such as: the age brackets of the learners, how many learners completed GSD 101, how many learners thought it was helpful or not although it is not a mandatory orientation for every learner, what learner’s rated the difficulty of the program, prior technology experience, if more expertise in technology is needed, and recommendations to include in a mandatory orientation if implemented.

Technology Knowledge/Skill

When analyzing the results of the Technology Knowledge/Skill section of the survey, I first filtered the responses for the first question, did you have prior knowledge on the technology used in the program? (i.e., blackboard, voice threads, etc.) into yes and no categories. For each of those categories I determined how many learners were male and how many learners were female, as well as the age range of respondents in both categories. Next, I examined the question, do you feel that more technological knowledge was/is needed for you to be successful in courses? and categorized those yes and no responses by gender and age range. I then looked at trends between technology and the other categories (orientation and program difficulty), noting how many learners within each of the four beforementioned categories also took orientation and how many learners within those four categories thought that a mandatory orientation would be beneficial. Lastly, I compared all categories with how each learner rated the difficulty of the online program, taking in consideration what their responses were for the short-response question, what are at least three things you would find helpful in a mandatory orientation course?

Program Difficulty

When analyzing the results of program difficulty, I followed a similar pattern to that of technology knowledge/skill. I categorized the 1-10 scale difficulty into three sections: easy (1-3), medium (4-6), and difficult (7-10) (see Table 3). I then looked at each section and identified how many of those learners were male, and how many of those learners were female. I also looked at the age group of each learner, based on section. Once I had those separated, I identified which of the learners in each category responded that they entered the online program with prior technology knowledge, which learners noted that more technology knowledge was needed to be successful, and each of their responses in the orientation topics short response. Lastly, I looked at each category and determined which learners responded that GSD 101 was beneficial or not beneficial, and which learners thought a mandatory orientation would be beneficial.

Table 3

Levels of program difficulty

Easy	Medium	Difficult
1-3	4-6	7-10

Note. Table created by researcher on the 25 of February 2023.

Orientation

Three questions about orientation were included in the survey. For this category, I determined how many learners took GSD 101 and thought it was beneficial versus how many learners took GSD 101 and thought it was not beneficial. I then identified how many learners responded that a mandatory orientation course was beneficial. Once I gathered the data from those two questions, I then identified how many learners in each category were male, how many learners were female, and the age bracket of each learner. When looking at learner responses to the short response question, what are three topics that should be included in a mandatory

orientation course? I decided if I wanted to group the responses, or if I wanted to incorporate responses as specific quotations. I decided to incorporate the responses as specific quotations. As Mertler (2020) states, “The only problem associated with asking open-ended items....is that you have the sometimes messy task of grouping responses into similar categories before you can count the responses,” (p. 146). I first attempted to categorize the short responses but found that they were better utilized in the analysis as direct quotations to support the quantitative survey data and the historical data.

Age

When analyzing the data, age was important when considering adult learners, because of their background in online courses in comparison to traditional aged learners. When the research began, I did not use this section in the survey expect to weed out the traditional-aged learners. However, when comparing orientation, technology, and program difficulty questions within the survey, I noticed some trends within the two non-traditional age brackets, so I collected my findings on this. Age was compared for each of the three categories within the survey. Results of this comparison were gathered to determine how many learners from each age bracket did benefit from GSD 101, how many learners would have benefited from a mandatory orientation, how many learners were prepared for the technology, such as accessing different portals, submitting assignments, and ease of usability, how many learners found that the program was much more difficult than anticipated, and what would have helped prepare them more for this and the technology.

Gender

Like age, gender was originally not part of this action research study. The question was on the survey to elicit general demographic data, but gender was not intended to be used to

compare results. However, when analyzing the findings, there were trends within gender worth reporting. Therefore, gender was added to the analysis of this research study. I compared gender with orientation, technology, and program difficulty, as well as with age.

Term after Term Data Analysis

In regard to data analysis for the trackers, a table was created detailing three consecutive terms in State University. The table explained how many new learners started in that term, how many of those learners took GSD 101, and how many learners retained for the following term. These learners may have participated in the survey as well, but this data was completely separate from the survey. I gathered data from three consecutive terms because that provided insight on the difference between an A term start and B term start. During an A term start learners typically register for the whole semester, whereas in a B term start, learners just register for that term. Once the table was created, a bar graph comparing retention over three consecutive terms was provided as a visual.

Further Analysis

Moving forward, data analysis was continued as such: 1) I wrote an account of the initial findings and conclusions, 2) Those findings and conclusions were compared to other studies, 3) The study's themes were re-visited, combined, and/or further elaborated.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the study's research methodology, research context, and research methods used in this study. Chapter 4 will report and discuss the study's findings and results.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore orientation as one way to improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs. The question that guided this action research project was, is orientation effective in improving retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? The study's sub-questions were 1) How does technology play a role in the retention of first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? 2) How does program difficulty impact retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? This chapter reports and discusses the study's findings and results.

Findings

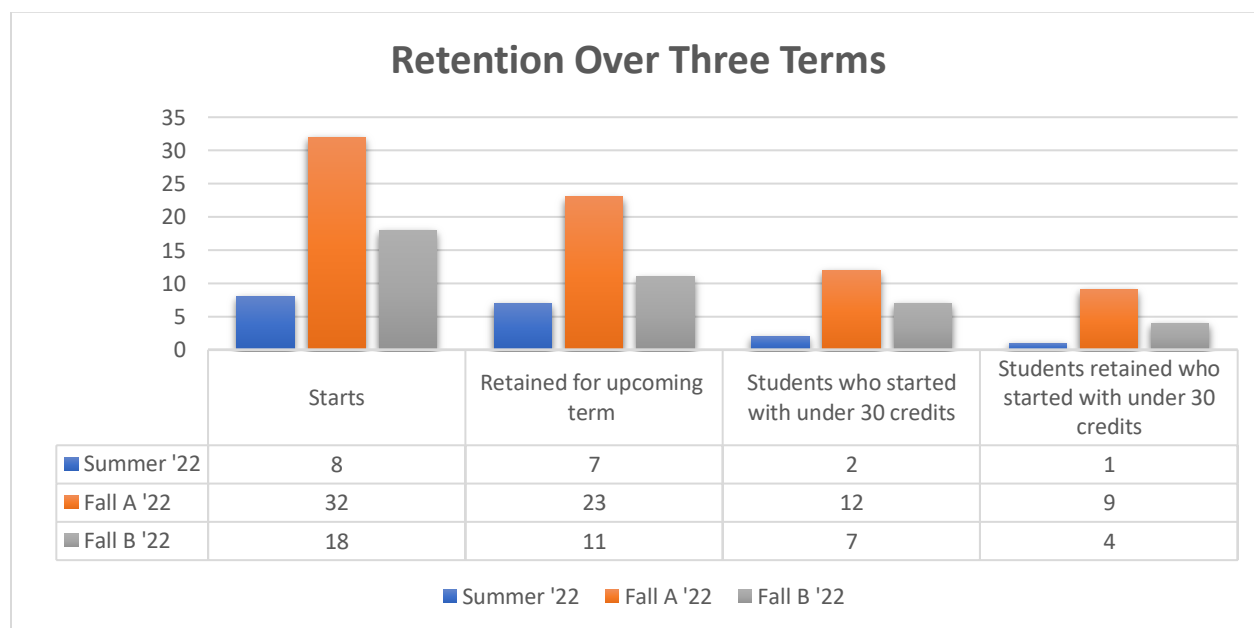
For this research project, two sets of data were analyzed. The first was retention over three terms for a 100% online program at State University and the second was the results of the anonymous survey sent out to that same population. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are three semesters and six terms for the academic year within the online program at State University. There are two terms per semester and terms are broken up into A and B, representing the first eight weeks of the semester (A term) and the second eight weeks of the semester (B term). There are also five starts to the program identified as follows: Fall A, Fall B, Spring A, Spring B, and Summer A. Learners can begin the program in any of these terms. For this study, retention over three consecutive starts was tracked to identify how many learners started and how many learners remained enrolled for the following term. The three terms were Summer A 2023, Fall A 2023, and Fall B 2023.

Retention Over Three Terms

In examining learner retention over three consecutive starts for the 100% online program at State University. The decrease is evident between the number of learners who start versus the number of learners who were retained for a second term (see Figure 2). While Summer 2023 had the highest retention, with only one learner not retaining, Fall A 2023 failed to retain nine learners and Fall B 2023 failed to retain seven learners. Of the learners who started in each of the terms, two learners took GSD 101 in Summer '22, 12 learners took GSD 101 in Fall A '22, and seven learners took GSD 101 in Fall B '22. Of those learners, one learner retained for their second term in Fall A '22, nine learners retained for their second term in Fall B '22, and four learners retained for their second term in Spring A '23.

Figure 2

Retention over three terms



Note. Data collected by researcher on the 17th of April 2023.

Technology

There were two questions related to learner use of technology on the survey. The first was, did you have prior knowledge of the technology used in the program? (i.e., blackboard,

voice threads, etc.) and the other was, do you feel that more technological knowledge was/is needed for you to be successful in courses? All 14 learners responded to both questions. When considering the first question, five learners said yes, they did have prior knowledge of the technology used in the program, and nine learners said they did not have prior knowledge. When considering the second question, three learners responded yes, more technology knowledge was needed to be successful in their courses, and 11 learners responded that more technology knowledge was not needed. Of the five learners who responded that they had prior technology knowledge, two learners, one male and one female, responded that more technology knowledge was needed to be successful in their courses. Of the nine learners who responded that they did not have prior technology knowledge, seven males and one female responded that more technology knowledge was needed to be successful in their courses, while one female responded that more technology knowledge was not needed. Of the learners who noted that they did not have prior technology knowledge, two topics mentioned in the mandatory orientation response were “navigating resources (i.e., library)” and “how to use blackboard mobile” (see Appendix C). Not having technology knowledge beforehand can set learners back, but these results indicate that learners can still be successful with whatever knowledge they have at the time they begin an online program.

Orientation vs. Technology

In comparing learners’ responses to the orientation and technology questions, 11 of the 14 learners said that more technological knowledge was not needed to be more successful in the program. Of the 11, six learners also noted that a mandatory orientation would not have made them more successful. The same 11 learners also responded that topics for a mandatory orientation should include “how to navigate college life,” “expectations,” and “study tips,” (see Appendix C) which are all included in the GSD 101 orientation course. Meanwhile, three

learners responded that more technology knowledge was needed to be more successful in the program. Of these three learners, one did not complete the orientation, and felt that an orientation would not be beneficial; and one completed the orientation and reported that it was not beneficial. One learner noted that “If [orientation] is going to be mandatory then students should take the course during their very first term. When I took mine, it was during the second term. [It] would have been more beneficial during the first.” In comparing learners’ responses to both the orientation and the technology survey questions, it appears that all five of the learners who completed orientation and thought it was beneficial also stated that more technology knowledge was not needed to be successful. Given that all five learners noted that they did not have prior technology knowledge, research indicates that they may have obtained some technology knowledge during the GSD 101 orientation.

Program Difficulty

All 14 learners chose a number on the Likert scale for program difficulty, one being the least difficult and 10 being the most difficult. Once learner ratings were compiled, the scale itself was divided into three categories: 1-3 (easy), 4-6 (medium), and 7-10 (hard). One learner rated the program easy, seven learners rated the program of medium or average difficulty, and six learners rated the program difficult. The learner who rated the program easy was male and did not identify three topics that should be included in a mandatory orientation. Instead, this learner recommended that “the student is there to learn, not make a statement; communication is key to success; [and] an effort has to [be] given.” These responses suggest that if a learner focuses on the goal, communicates, and puts in the effort, they will be successful.

Five of the learners who rated the program as medium or average difficulty were male, while two were female. The most common response from learners who rated the program as

medium or average difficulty on what should be included in a mandatory orientation was “time management.” Of the five learners who rated the program as difficult, four were male, while one was female. The most common response from learners who rated the program as difficult on what should be included in a mandatory orientation was “technology information”. Of the three females that participated in the survey, none rated the program as easy. Instead, those three learners mentioned that one of the topics they would include in a mandatory orientation was “access to resources” and two included “time management” in their response. These responses suggest that adding school along with other responsibilities, such as family life and work, increased the difficulty of the program to learners.

Program Difficulty vs. Orientation and Technology

Table 4

Gender differences in survey responses

	Total Learners	Learner completed orientation	Orientation was beneficial	Mandatory orientation would be beneficial	Learner has previous technology knowledge	More technology knowledge is needed
Male	11	5	5	0	3	2
Female	3	1	0	0	2	1

Note. Data collected by researcher on the 10th of March 2023.

Of the 14 learners who completed the survey, six took GSD 101. When asked if orientation was beneficial to their success as a learner, five learners responded yes, and one learner responded no. The learner who responded no rated the difficulty of the program as medium or average, and thought that more technology knowledge was needed to be successful even though the learner had prior technology knowledge used in the program. Of the five learners who felt that orientation was beneficial, four rated the difficulty of the program as

medium or average and one considered the program difficult. These findings indicate that while orientation can be beneficial, it should involve items that could potentially decrease the level of difficulty learners encounter within the program.

Seven learners responded to the survey question, do you feel that a mandatory orientation course would have made you more successful as a learner? and of those, all seven said no. This unanimous result begs the question of whether learners responded no because they would not want an additional thing to do, or if they genuinely believe that a mandatory orientation would not be beneficial to their academic success. Of those seven, one learner rated the difficulty of the program as easy, two rated the difficulty of the program as medium or average, and four rated the difficulty of the program as hard. It can be inferred that the learner who rated the program as easy does not think a mandatory orientation would make them more successful, because they are already successful and finding the program easy. The two learners who rated the program as average both mentioned that they had previous technology experience and no more was needed, so it is likely that they said a mandatory orientation would not be beneficial because the program was what they expected. Regarding the four students who rated the program as difficult, only one learner had previous technology experience but also responded that more technology experience was needed. The other three learners said they had no previous technology experience but no more was needed, yet, two of these learners mentioned that “technology” and “resources” were topics that would be helpful in a mandatory orientation course. Because none of these students took GSD 101, it is possible that had they taken the course and learned about technology and resources, they would rate the program as less difficult. In other words, had they taken GSD 101 and were successful, those learners might see the benefit of a mandatory orientation. Therefore,

while these responses indicate that a mandatory orientation would not be successful, the right tools and concepts in an orientation could lead to learner success and, thus, increased retention.

Of the six learners who completed orientation, one learner was female and five were male. The learner who took orientation and said it was not beneficial rated the program as medium or average difficulty, and the five learners who took orientation and found it beneficial rated the program as medium or average and difficult. Five of the six learners who completed orientation responded that more technology knowledge was not needed to be successful in courses, while one learner said that more technology knowledge was needed to be successful in classes. Seven learners, two females and five males, responded that they did not take the orientation course, and a mandatory orientation would not be beneficial. Four of those learners rated the program as difficult, two learners rated the program of medium or average difficulty and one learner rated the program as easy.

There were five learners who responded that they had prior knowledge of the technology used within the program, while nine admitted that they did not. Of the five learners who were familiar with technology, one rated the difficulty of the program as easy, three rated the difficulty of the program as medium or average, and one rated the difficulty of the program as hard. Of the nine learners who said they did not have prior knowledge of the technology used within the program, none rated the difficulty of the program as easy, four rated the difficulty of the program as medium or average, and five rated the difficulty of the program as difficult. Interestingly, only two of those learners identified “using blackboard” as a mandatory orientation topic. Given the level of program difficulty learners acknowledge, it is interesting that only two learners recognized technology as a mandatory orientation topic. On the other hand, six learners identified “time management” as a mandatory orientation topic. It appears that time seemed to be

the prevailing factor as to why learners rated the program as medium or average difficulty or difficult, and it could be that if the learners had more time to learn the technology the program could be easier.

When asked if more technology knowledge was needed to be successful in the program, three learners said yes and 11 said no. Of the three learners who responded yes, one rated the difficulty of the program as medium or average, and two rated the difficulty of the program as hard. Of the 11 learners who responded that more technology knowledge was not needed, one rated the difficulty of the program as easy, six rated the difficulty of the program as medium or average, and four rated the difficulty of the program as difficult. It should be noted that the learner who rated the difficulty of the program as easy said that they did have prior knowledge of the technology used for the program and that no more technological knowledge was needed to be successful in the program. Of the six learners who rated the program as difficult, five said that they did not have previous technology experience, two said that more technology experience was needed, and four said that a mandatory orientation would not make them successful. Given that the common topics among those learners were “time management” and “technology”, it can be inferred that although the program is difficult, these learners do not have the time to dedicate to a mandatory orientation, even though it would cover time management and technology. Without the chance to learn about time management, technology, and “expectations” there is a chance that these learners who rated the program as difficult will fall behind and not retain throughout the entirety of the program.

Orientation

There were three questions about orientation asked in the survey. The first two were, was orientation beneficial to your success as a student? and, is a mandatory orientation needed to be

more successful in the program? The third and last question regarding orientation was, what are at least three things you would find helpful in a mandatory orientation course? When considering the first question, six of the 14 learners responded that they completed the orientation, and of those, five were male and one was female. Of the six learners who completed the orientation, only one learner said it was not beneficial, while five learners thought it was beneficial.

Interestingly, the learner who did not think orientation was beneficial was female. She mentioned two topics that should be taught in a mandatory orientation course: “student resources and strategies for scheduling/completing studying/assignments for better retention,” both of which are taught in the GSD 101 orientation. One reason for this learner’s mistaken reasoning may have been that she rushed through orientation without taking the time to dive into the modules. All five learners who thought orientation was beneficial were males. One male learner mentioned, “If it is going to be mandatory then learners should take the [orientation] course during their very first term. When I took mine, it was during the [second] term, [and] would have been more beneficial during the [first].” Since the other learners who took the orientation also mentioned “time management” as a mandatory orientation topic, it can be argued that orientation should be taken by non-traditional learners prior to the start of the program.

Of the 14 learners who completed the survey, eight learners responded that they did not take orientation. Of those, seven learners responded to the question, if you did not take an orientation course, do you feel that a mandatory course would have made you more successful as a learner? All seven learners said no. Two of the seven learners who did not complete the orientation were female and five were male. Learners who did not complete the orientation cited topics such as “blackboard help,” “navigating resources,” and “time management,” as recommended for a mandatory orientation course, begging the notion that if a mandatory

orientation were implemented and these items were reviewed, learners would begin the program with a clearer understanding.

Gender Differences

Although gender differences among non-traditional learners' perspectives was not originally identified as a purpose of this study, gender differences stood out as a theme throughout analysis of learners' perceptions of orientation, technology, and program difficulty. One hundred percent of male learners who took orientation thought it was beneficial, while 100% of female learners who took orientation thought it was not beneficial. In addition, 100% of female learners said mandatory orientation was not needed to make them more successful. According to Banks (2010), "Female non-traditional students' enrollment decisions are limited by external and financial responsibilities associated with supporting others and paying for school," (p. 32). This includes familial and home responsibilities, which take time. Because GSD 101 orientation is not mandated for every student, these gender-specific responses indicate that, for women, having an extra task not only made orientation not beneficial, but suggested that a mandatory orientation, or another thing to do, would also not be beneficial to female learners' success.

Discussion

Technology Correlates to Orientation

The findings suggest that technology correlates to orientation. Of the 11 learners who responded that more technology knowledge was not needed to be successful in their courses, six learners responded that orientation would not make them successful. That is more than 50% of learners. Given that eight of these learners mentioned that they did not have previous technology experience, it can be interred that orientation would, in fact, make them successful. Delivering orientation online introduces technology to learners and allows them to access and experiment

with using various technology platforms before courses start. Completing this ensures that once their programmatic courses begin, learners are fully prepared. Bozarth et al. (2004) found a disconnect in learners' and faculty members expectations about learners' technical competencies, the amount of time learners should devote to the course, and the level of interaction between faculty and learners and among learners. While someone proficient in the use of technology may take less time to maneuver a database, someone with fewer technological skills may spend a few hours a week learning how to use recent technologies.

Nine learners responded that they did not have previous technology experience. Seven of those learners also responded that more technology knowledge was not needed to be successful in their courses. It could be that these learners do not want to spend any extra time learning technology, so they responded that more knowledge was not needed to be successful. Of the study's 14 research participants, the learners who had prior knowledge in technology were in a younger age bracket of non-traditional aged learners. While all the learners who participated in the survey were non-traditional learners, all five of the learners who responded that they had prior technology experience were in the age bracket of 26-40. Although four other learners in that same age bracket responded that they did not have previous technology knowledge, the five learners who responded that they did not have prior technology knowledge were in the age bracket of 41-65. It could be possible that the five learners who had previous technology experience were on the younger side of 26-40, while the four learners in that age bracket who responded that they did not have previous technology experience could have been on the older side. Therefore, these learners in the younger side of the age bracket could potentially have more technology skills and adapt faster and more seamlessly than the learners in the 41-65 years old age bracket. The study indicated that older learners who do not feel prepared with the technology

used in a 100% online program may be more difficult to retain, especially when they are trying to learn this new technology. The findings of this result indicate that non-traditional learners lower on the age bracket may take less time to adapt to new technology than non-traditional learners higher on the age bracket.

Program Difficulty Trumps Orientation, and Correlates to Technology

The findings further suggest that program difficulty trumps orientation, and correlates to technology. Learners who rated the program as difficult said orientation would not benefit them. Three of these learners also did not have previous knowledge in technology but said that more technology knowledge was not needed to be successful. The highest difficulty rating noted in the survey was 8 and four learners rated the program difficult at 8. All four of those learners were in the age bracket of 41-65, and only one learner of the four took GSD 101 and stated that it was beneficial. While none of the four learners that rated the program difficulty of the program 8 had previous technology experience, all four learners responded that more technology experience was needed, and three of the learners responded that a mandatory orientation would not be beneficial. Even so, “time management” was a common trend in their responses as to what should be in a mandatory orientation course. It can be deduced that learners do need orientation to be successful, and it is necessary to incorporate technology into said orientation. As Miller and Pope (2002) mention, “Orientations are a great example of what student should expect from their new institution” (p. 16) such as registering for courses, payment options, and even student services.

One hundred percent of learners who found the program easy or of medium to average difficulty were in the age range of 26-40, while 83% of learners who found the program difficult were in the age range of 41-65, while 17% of learners who found the program difficult were in the age range of 26-40. Interestingly, 100% of learners in the age range of 41-65 had no prior

technology knowledge, while only 45% of learners in the age range of 26-40 responded that they had no prior technology experience. The learner that rated the difficulty of the program as easy took orientation but did not think it was beneficial. This learner also had prior technology experience and responded that more technology experience was not needed to be successful in courses. This learner was also in the age bracket of 26-40 and could have been on the younger side of that bracket. While there is no certainty that this learner will retain throughout the entirety of the program, the findings of this result indicate that it is more likely that the learner who rated the difficulty of the program as easy would be easier to retain than the older learners who rated the program as difficult.

As previously mentioned by Bawa (2016), learners typically find that flexibility and lower tuition are outweighed by the demands of their lifestyles, technology, and programmatic knowledge. The online learning environment is very largely self-driven and dependent on the learners' ability to manage academic responsibilities, with fewer props than those available in face-to-face classes. Therefore, "if learners have not experienced this kind of self-imposed academic discipline before, they are very likely to experience demotivation, forcing them to quit," (Bawa, 2016, p. 4). While it is possible that some of the learners who rated the program as difficult and may not retain just do not have the aptitude to be successful in the program, it is also a possibility that because of the lessened support they are used to, during their first term these non-traditional learners are not as motivated to apply themselves, making the program harder than they originally thought and retention a more out-of-reach concept. This motivation can especially be hard to apply when adding it to an already full plate of family, home, and work life.

Orientation is Effective

The study's findings indicate that orientation was effective for those who completed it. While seven of the eight learners that did not take GSD 101 responded that a mandatory orientation would not be beneficial, five out of the six learners who took GSD 101 responded that it was, in fact, beneficial to their success as a student. Of the eight learners that did not take GSD 101, five learners rated the program as difficult and four expressed the need for support in the areas of "time management," "navigating blackboard," and "resources," which are already included in the orientation course. If learners do not feel that they have the knowledge or skill set needed for a program, they are less likely to remain in it, driving—or in this case—reducing retention. By including resources in orientation, such as counseling services or tutoring resources, learners are provided with the tools that they need without searching for it. According to Collins and Dodsworth (2011), through orientation, new students are welcomed into the institution, acquainted with school rules and regulations, courses, and requirements for graduation. Furthermore, those resources would be in a centralized location that would remain on their platform dashboard for the entirety of their educational career.

This study identified time management as a topic many learners felt should be mandatory in an orientation course. According to Bawa (2016), learners tend to overestimate their abilities when it comes to time, commitment, and technological skills required in online learning, and one way to deal with all of that is with orientation. Orientation programs can "introduce learners to the rigors and unique demands of the online classes," (p. 7), allowing for the practice learners may not know they need. While the findings of this study suggest that learners do not want to take orientation, it is evident that retention in this student's online program at State University is decreasing. It is not a matter of what may be the most time-efficient, but what will be the most effective method of ensuring learner success by retaining learners. According to Hoffman et al.

(2020) “Student orientation helps to foster student success; research suggests that those who participate in orientation programs generally perform better than those who do not and persist to graduation at a higher rate,” (par. 2). While it may be a little more time consuming, research indicates that orientation is effective.

Answers to the Study’s Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore orientation as one way to improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program at State University. The question that guided this action research project was, is orientation effective in improving retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? The study’s sub-questions were 1) How does technology play a role in the retention of first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? 2) How does program difficulty impact retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? In this section, each sub-question is answered before the study’s overarching question is addressed.

How does technology play a role in the retention of first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs?

Based on what the 14 learners in the study shared and the retention data reviewed, learners who were familiar with the technology used in the program, and those who were able to quickly familiarize themselves, spent less time adapting to technology platforms and more time utilizing these platforms to complete their coursework, thus, increasing their productivity, academic success, and retention in the program. Therefore, mastering the program technology increases the likelihood of retention. One strategy that can improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs at State University is introducing technology platforms before the start of the program.

How does program difficulty impact retention for first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs?

Based on what the 14 learners in the study shared and the retention data reviewed, learners who identified the program as difficult also reported more difficulty managing their time, thus negatively impacting their likelihood of retention in the program. In addition, learners who rated the program as difficult did not feel that more technology assistance prior to the start of the program would be beneficial, which negatively impacts their likelihood of retention in the program even further. Two additional strategies that can improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs at State University are introducing the amount of rigor to be expected within the program and providing learners a hub where they can find all the resources needed throughout their educational journey.

Is orientation effective in improving retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program?

Based on what the 14 learners in the study shared and the retention data reviewed, the study revealed that orientation is effective in improving retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program. Although 100% of the learners who did not take GSD 101 responded that they were not interested in a mandatory orientation course, 83% of learners who took GSD 101 responded that it was beneficial to their success as a student. While mandating orientation is not a popular opinion, orientation itself is beneficial to learner success. By incorporating an orientation that introduces and allows learners to become familiar with technology used before starting their first term, as well as including concepts such as time management and study methods, learners can be better prepared for their first term. Utilizing different technology to engage learners in orientation would not only allow learners to become

familiar with strategies to address topics such as student resources, time management, and student expectations, but it would also introduce technology that may be incorporated in the program. Ideally, such an orientation would allow learners to view the program as easy or average, have a handle on time management, and have access to all the resources provided to them as students, thus, increasing retention.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reported and discussed the study's findings before concluding with answers to the study's research questions. Chapter 5 will draw conclusions, identify the study's limitations, discuss implications for practice, and make recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore orientation as one way to improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners in online undergraduate programs. The question that guided this action research project was, is orientation effective in improving retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? The study's sub-questions were 1) How does technology play a role in the retention of first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? 2) How does program difficulty impact retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program? This chapter provides answers to the study's research questions in light of the study's findings before discussing implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and limitations of the study.

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Technology Correlates to Orientation

Technology knowledge and orientation go hand in hand. It was found that technology knowledge does play a role in the retention of first-term non-traditional students in an online undergraduate program. By incorporating technology into orientation, learners are better prepared for their academic journey and have a greater likelihood of retaining throughout their program.

Program Difficulty Trumps Orientation, and Correlates to Technology

Learners who said more technology was not needed and orientation was not beneficial to their success as a learner also rated the program as more difficult. The findings of this result indicate that it is more likely that learners who rated the difficulty of the program as easy would be easier to retain than the learners who rated the program as difficult. Program difficulty may impact retention for first-term non-traditional students in an online undergraduate program based

on their technology knowledge expertise. It is also a possibility that because of the lessened support they are used to, during their first term these non-traditional learners are not as motivated to apply themselves, making the program harder than they originally thought and retention a more out-of-reach concept.

Orientation is Effective

This study identified that orientation is effective in improving retention for first-term non-traditional learners in an online undergraduate program. Although 100% of the learners who did not take GSD 101 responded that they were not interested in a mandatory orientation course, 83% of learners who took GSD 101 responded that it was beneficial to their success as a student. While mandating orientation is not a popular opinion, orientation itself was found to be beneficial to learner success. This, however, would take more time, a luxury that many non-traditional learners do not have to spare, creating tension for learners between the benefits and the time required to complete an orientation prior to beginning their online program. Nonetheless, all but one of the learners who completed GSD 101 did find the orientation to be beneficial.

Researcher Response

As these learners' advisor, I found it interesting that learners who did not complete GSD 101 did not respond positively to a proposed mandated orientation, particularly since a mandatory orientation could be the key in linking technology knowledge and program difficulty for a more successful start and retention. Again, it seems that saving time and hoping for the best is more important to some non-traditional learners than making the time to complete an orientation to prepare for success.

Implications for Practice

Based on this study's findings, I continue to believe that orientation is necessary for learners, but perhaps not for every learner. This may just mean recreating GSD 101 into an orientation that embodies the technology, time, and rigor anticipated for a typical week in the program, and along with expectations, especially for non-traditional learners looking to pursue a 100% online program in the midst of work, family life, and other responsibilities. As noted in previous chapters, GSD 101 is currently mandated only for learners who enter the program with under 30 credit hours. This includes learners who have never enrolled in an online program before, and learners who have never taken a higher education course before, or learners who have not taken a course in decades. On the other hand, a learner could enter the program with 30-credits after a 40-year academic hiatus and would not be required to take GSD 101, even if they have never taken an online course. These are the first-term non-traditional learners who often do not retain, after struggling with both adapting to new technology and difficult course content. Therefore, State University should develop criteria to identify learners beyond the fewer than 30 credits rule who are mandated to take an orientation course, such as learners who have never taken an online course, learners who enter the program below a certain GPA, and learners attending college/university for the first time. Learners who meet these criteria could be waived from the orientation, but those who do not would be required to complete the orientation prior to their first term, to fully understand the technology and rigor of the program. Once these learners understand the technology platforms and rigor of the program, technology and program difficulty may not be factors that could prevent retention.

There could be learners who start a program and are proficient with technology, and can adapt quickly, but still find the program too difficult. In this case, preparing for the program can further be catered to the learners' need by creating both full-time and part-time orientations. The

technology used and the rigor required would be the same, but a full-time learner may spend more hours in a week on their studies than a part-time learner would. Giving non-traditional learners a glimpse of a week in the life of a part-time or full-time learner would allow them to prepare themselves for what lies ahead in the program. It would grant them the time to practice before jumping into their first term or allow them to switch their student status beforehand, thus helping to improve retention not only for the first term, but for the entirety of the program.

Suggestions for Future Research

I am particularly intrigued that 100% of learners in this study said no to mandatory orientation. It would benefit future researchers to focus a study on this finding alone, specifically comparing institutions where orientation is and is not mandated. In addition, because this study focused on non-traditional learners as a whole, it would be beneficial to dive into the specific age categories for non-traditional learners. This would be especially interesting since different age brackets could lead to different findings regarding learner needs and preferences. Lastly, while gender differences were not originally noted in the research question or sub-questions, this study found many gender-based trends. Delving deeper into gender differences for non-traditional learners would be an informative topic for future research.

Limitations

While the results of this research study revealed a wealth of information about orientation, technology, program difficulty and strategies to improve retention for first-term non-traditional learners, there were also limitations. First was the number of learners who participated. Although the survey was sent to 250 students, only 14 responded, rendering an overall response rate of 6%. It would have benefited this study if more learners had responded. Secondly, the honesty of the 14 respondents' answers must be taken into consideration as a possible limitation. While the survey was anonymous, I was the direct advisor for all 250

learners invited to participate in the study, so some learners may have reported what they thought would please me. Third, while the survey presented a lot of eye-opening responses, it would have been beneficial to gather more qualitative data. More open-ended questions on the survey could have provided more information on what technology struggles learners faced, if learners thought they would successfully make it through the entirety of the program, if program difficulty got easier over the course of a few terms, and why program difficulty seemed to decrease. While more open-ended questions would have added meaningfully to my ability to answer the study's research question and sub-questions. The final limitation is my researcher positionality as the advisor for the learners who participated in the study. It is possible that my strong support for a mandatory orientation introduced researcher bias into the analysis of the study's findings. To minimize researcher bias, I stated my opinions about a mandatory orientation in chapter 1 of this report, clarified my researcher positionality in chapter 3, and distinguished my personal opinions from the findings themselves in chapter 4. In addition, during the data analysis process, I incorporated direct quotations from learner's responses when examining the findings of orientation, technology, and program difficulty to draw conclusions without bias.

Conclusion

This chapter summarized the findings of this study, and discussed implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and limitations of the study. As an advisor for students in a 100% online program at State University, my hope is that mandated orientations—either part time or full time—are implemented throughout every 100% online program at State University, with learners who meet certain criteria exempt. By incorporating a mandatory orientation that introduces and allows learners to become familiar with technology used before starting their first term, as well as including concepts such as time management, student resources, study methods,

learners at State University can be better prepared for their first term, allowing learners to successfully complete the program, thus, increasing retention.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY EMAIL

Good afternoon, Colonel,

I am currently a student at Bradley University, and I am conducting a study on ways to improve retention for first-term undergraduate students in an online program. I have created a 5–7 minute survey that I would appreciate you completing. More information on my program/study is below! **Please click on this survey link to participate in the study.** <https://forms.office.com/r/fsnZvvXjUa>

Study Title: How to Improve Retention for First-Term Undergraduate Students in an Online Program

Invitation to be part of a research study:

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate you must be an online undergraduate student. Please take the time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding to participate in this research project.

What is purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to describe ways to improve retention for first-term students in online undergraduate programs.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey. This will take approximately 5-7 minutes. Data will be compiled regarding the effectiveness of different strategies to improve retention.

What are the risks and benefits of participating in the study?

There are no risks or discomforts involved in this research, and the study will have no direct benefits to you. However, your participation in the study may benefit others in the future by helping to increase retention in online undergraduate students.

Are there any incentives for participating in the study? There are no incentives offered for participating.

Do I have to participate?

No. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

What if I begin participating and then change my mind? You may stop participating at any time without penalty.

Will the results of the study be published?

Yes. We plan to publish the results of the study.

How will my information be protected?

To protect your privacy, we will not include any information in the final report that can directly identify you. The survey is anonymous, so your identity will not be known. Any other information that can be used to identify you will be stored in an online file on a computer that is password protected. Once the research is over the file will be deleted.

We will protect the confidentiality of your research record.

We are collecting the data anonymously. There is no link between your name or other information that can directly identify you and the research record.

After the study, what will happen to the data collected?

The information will be destroyed after completion of the study.

What are the costs?

There are no costs for participation in this study.

Your participation in the study is voluntary

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. You do not need to answer any question you do not want to answer.

Who should I call with questions or problems study?

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the researcher in charge of this study: Priya Eastwood, 866-939-5789, peastwood@online.eku.edu

Who should I contact with questions about my rights as a research participant?

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research (CUHSR)
Bradley University
1501 W Bradley Avenue
Peoria, IL 61625
(309) 677-3877

Your informed consent

By clicking on the survey link below, you are voluntarily making a decision to participate in this study. Clicking on the survey link and completing the survey means that you have read and understand the information presented and have decided to participate. Clicking on the survey link also means that the information on this consent form has been fully explained to you and all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. If you think of any additional questions during the study, you should contact the researcher(s).

Please let me know if you have any questions/concerns!

APPENDIX B
SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. I would like to participate in the research study. By clicking yes, I am agreeing to consent.
2. Are you Male or Female?
3. What age range do you fall under?
4. If you took the orientation course (GSD 101), do you feel that it was beneficial to your success as a student?
5. If you did NOT take an orientation course, do you feel that a mandatory orientation course would have made you more successful as a student?
6. What are at least 3 things you would find helpful in a MANDATORY orientation course?
7. Did you have previous knowledge on the technology used in the program? I.e., Blackboard, voice threads, etc.
8. Do you feel that more technology knowledge is/was needed for you to be successful in courses?
9. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being the easiest and 10 being the hardest), what would you rate the difficulty level of this program so far?

APPENDIX C

SURVEY RESULTS

Are you Male or Female?	What age range do you fall under?	If you took the orientation course (GSD 101), do you feel that it was beneficial to your success as a student?	If you did NOT take an orientation course, do you feel that a mandatory course would have made you more successful as a student?	What are at least 3 things you would find helpful in a MANDATORY orientation course?	Did you have prior knowledge on the technology used in the program? I.e: blackboard, voice threads, etc.	Do you feel that more technological knowledge was/is needed for you to be successful in courses?	On a scale of 1-10, 1 being the easiest and 10 being the hardest, what would you rate the difficulty level of this program (so far)?
Female	26-40	No	N/A (choose this if you	Personal finances (avoiding credit debt in college), student resources (counseling, tutoring, etc.), and strategies for scheduling/completing studying/assignments for better retention.	Yes	Yes	6
Female	26-40	I did not take GSD 101	No	Time management skills, how to navigate college life, where to go when you did help	Yes	No	5
Male	26-40	I did not take GSD 101	No		Yes	No	6
Male	26-40	Yes	N/A (choose this if you	during the 2nd term, would have been more beneficial during the 1st.	No	No	6
Male	26-40	I did not take GSD 101	No	The student is there to learn, not make a statement; communication is key to success; an effort has to be given	Yes	No	3
Male	26-40	I did not take GSD 101	No	Blackboard information, technology information, professors in the program	Yes	Yes	7
Male	26-40	Yes	N/A (choose this if you	Stressing requirement dates, campus mapping, required study time	No	No	6
Male	26-40	Yes	N/A (choose this if you	time, time, time	No	No	5
Male	26-40	Yes	N/A (choose this if you	edition Handbook 3) How to judge how much study time taking 12-18 hours online really takes to succeed.	No	No	6
Female	41-65	I did not take GSD 101	No	benefits available to students just because you are enrolled (Office 365, Amazon Prime for students)	No	No	8
Male	41-65	I did not take GSD 101			No	Yes	7
Male	41-65	I did not take GSD 101	No	Planning, Financial Aid and expectations	No	No	8
Male	41-65	Yes	N/A (choose this if you	study methods, degree works planning and time management	No	No	8
Male	41-65	I did not take GSD 101	No	Time management, study, and resourceful skills.	No	No	8